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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the planning, implementation, and findings of an evaluation study intended to investigate parent participation activities in a South Australian kindergarten. The study was carried out by kindergarten staff and was conducted in four phases: (1) development of a rationale for parent participation; (2) development of strategies for involving parents; (3) design of an opinionnaire to establish whether, and how much, parents want to participate in kindergarten activities; and (4) the use of diaries, videotape cameras, and photography to observe and record all types of parent participation during the second term of the 1980 school year. As a result of the opinionnaire, kindergarten staff found that a majority of parents did want to participate, and were more than willing to do so if they knew what their role would be. Based on the observation phase, teachers found that parents participated in several ways, including decision-making, provision of information, teaching, and raising funds for school activities. A copy of the opinionnaire is included in the appendix. (Author/MP)

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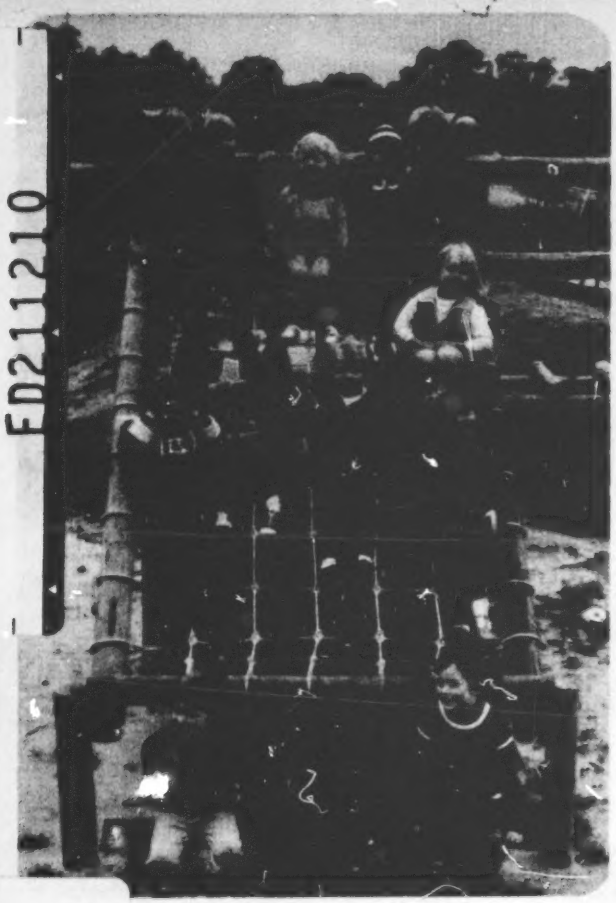

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giving an account

PART IV

TEACHERS AS EVALUATORS PROJECT

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TEACHERS AS EVALUATORS PROJECT

GIVING AN ACCOUNT

PART IV

EVALUATION: Parent Participation at Springbrook Kindergarten, South Australia

Chris Christensen

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FOREWORD

This account is the first to result from an Evaluation Workshop held on 4-5 June 1980. Selected Directors and their Advisers were invited to work for two days with Mr Neil Russell, Director, Teachers as Evaluators Project (a project funded by the Curriculum Development Centre). Since then another workshop has been held and further evaluation is in progress.

As this was the first attempt at a kindergarten-based evaluation, staff members and the committee involved were breaking new ground. Despite the availability of guidelines they were very much on their own and are to be commended for their effort.

We do not see this account as a model to be followed, but as an example which illustrates how a particular kindergarten staff and committee planned and carried out an evaluation. We hope that other kindergarten staff and parents will find it interesting and that it will provide inspiration for people involved with pre-schools to evaluate their work.

Fred Ebbeck.

(Dr) F.N. EBBECK
Executive Director
Kindergarten Union of
South Australia

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EVALUATION: PARENT PARTICIPATION AT SPRINGBROOK KINDERGARTEN, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

INTRODUCTION

When the teachers at Springbrook Kindergarten first considered evaluating parent participation in kindergarten activities the original intention was to investigate:

(i) whether parents wanted to participate in the kindergarten;

(ii) what types of parent participation were occurring.

After beginning, however, they realized that although resources were plentiful, no well-defined ideas about working with parents or a policy statement relating to parent participation were in existence. So the kindergarten director and teachers decided to produce a philosophical statement about parent participation, make a resource file to support this statement in a practical way, and develop an evaluation strategy which could be used to establish the effectiveness of both.

The following account outlines these procedures.

BACKGROUND: SPRINGBROOK KINDERGARTEN

Springbrook Kindergarten is situated in a southern suburb of Adelaide. This area has grown rapidly in the last ten years, and as a result there are many young married couples in the area.

The kindergarten was built in 1975 and since its inception has always been an integral part of the community. In 1978 there were over one hundred families requesting placement for their four-year-olds. Since then three half-day sessions have been organised so that a maximum number of children can have some kindergarten attendance. Children attend for three half-days and there are three groups with approximately thirty-eight children in each. On Friday afternoons two playgroups are run for three-year-olds, with each catering for about twenty-five children.

Children may be included on the kindergarten waiting list from the age of three. However, only four-year-old children can be enrolled for kindergarten unless there are special circumstances. Children are admitted according to age order and most children begin the month after they turn four.

Initial contact with families is by phone or letter, or given verbally (if they attend playgroup). Parents are told by the Kindergarten Director which group their child will be in and asked to visit the kindergarten before their child begins, to discuss the kindergarten program and to look around.

Most children remain in the kindergarten for twelve months, but family contacts are constantly changing as some children leave kindergarten for school, and others begin kindergarten. A number of families take their children to Playgroup, others do not, some have had children at kindergarten before and others have not, which leads to a diverse range of experience in, and knowledge of, kindergarten life.

The kindergarten is a member of the Kindergarten Union of South Australia; a statutory authority which employs all staff. Staffing consists of one director (4 years experience), two teachers (1 and 6 years experience, respectively), and one aide (6 years experience). All work on a full-time basis. The kindergarten is funded according to the number of four-year-olds who attend each term (a variable component), plus a fixed amount which all kindergartens receive.

The kindergarten is run by a Management Committee, which is made up of parents and the Director. This Committee has the following functions:

> *"The Management Committee is the body with sole responsibility for managing the finance and maintaining the kindergarten. It has a responsibility to the Kindergarten Union, to the members of the kindergarten and to the staff at the kindergarten. The Committee's responsibility is to:*
>
> - *plan and authorise the use of kindergarten funds;*
> - *arrange local fund-raising activities;*
> - *arrange for the development and maintenance of the kindergarten;*
> - *arrange for the purchasing of equipment and materials;*
> - *maintain the buildings, grounds and equipment in a safe, secure and hygienic condition;*
> - *communicate with members of the kindergarten through the staff, general meetings, informal functions, newsletters, notices, etc.;*
> - *promote interest in the kindergarten throughout the local community.*
>
> *The Committee's activities are constrained by the Kindergarten Union Act, the Statutes made under the Act, the Kindergarten's Constitutions and directives issued by the Kindergarten Union."*[1]

The Committee holds an extremely responsible position, and without it the kindergarten could not function.

THE EVALUATION

DEVELOPING AN OVERALL PLAN

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of parent participation in relation to teacher expectations, given the limited time children and parents spend at kindergarten. Information normally available tends to concentrate on the more measurable aspects of kindergarten life, such as 'home background' and educational progress, rather than extending teachers' knowledge of parent participation to improve curriculum offerings.

The evaluation at Springbrook Kindergarten occurred as a result of an inservice day run by the Kindergarten Union. This day was spent in looking at procedures for undertaking school-level evaluation and, in particular, at the role of teachers in this process. As a result staff at Springbrook decided to investigate parent participation in the kindergarten. A number of methods were used to do this:

1. Development of a rationale for parent participation.

2. Development of strategies to involve parents.

3. Design of an opinionnaire to establish whether, and how much, parents want to participate in kindergarten life.

4. Observation and recording of all types of parent participation in Term 2 1980, using diary, video and photography.

1. Development of a rationale for parent participation

In order to develop a rationale for parent participation the teachers at Springbrook Kindergarten reviewed recent studies undertaken in the area. They concluded that any decision made about educational activities is based on a certain set of values and "no one set of values can be said to be of most worth ... anything can be ... it depends on interest."[2] With this in mind they felt that the activities they valued must be justified from a rational base.

Taking as a starting point Honig's[3] suggestion that today's emphasis on parent participation has evolved from the following types of research findings:

(i) Accumulative Research Data showing that programs in which parents participated were more beneficial than those in which they did not;

(ii) Observed cultural and familial differences in parent-child interactions; and

(iii) Accumulative positive evidence of the effectiveness of parent participation in their children's education in influencing academic motivation;

the teachers considered parent participation in terms of children's needs.

The Kindergarten Union in South Australia accepts that parent-teacher relations are crucial, and sees the process of education as a partnership between parents and teachers. The law allows the family to provide for a child's education until age six and, traditionally, families in Australia have taken the major responsibility for teaching

children skills and social mores. Increasingly, however, kindergartens have begun to provide support and programs for families and children.

Although this is occurring, the teachers believed that the interests of home and school were not always the same and, as a result, maintained the school should remember the following ...

> *"Parent participation works within the context of a complex set of traditions, value assumptions and attitudes regarding the relationship of the family and society, the individual and the State. This should not be our excuse for doing nothing but may be helpful in our tolerance of the failure that will inevitably attend some of our efforts and remind us of the fact that our strategies need to have roots in an adequate theory."*[4]

Coupled with this is the fact that parents are a child's first teachers and as such will have the greatest impact on the child's development. In this context teachers

> *" ... are concerned with the primary socialising agency - the family, and the primary inducting agency - the kindergarten."*[5]

For these reasons, parent participation is a desirable end. It may also be desirable for psychological reasons. Going to kindergarten is probably the child's first major move away from the home, and the year he/she spends there represents one quarter of life to date. So, the more a teacher can learn about a child's background the easier it should be to plan for the child and to offer support to and communicate with his/her parents.

On a practical level, the Kindergarten Union centres tend to be established because parents in an area believe they will be beneficial for their children. Hence, a foundation is already laid for participation. Not all teachers and parents

are enthusiastic about working with one another, nevertheless it would appear that if the teacher is concerned about placing children in an environment to allow them to develop to their fullest potential, then working with parents is essential.

2. Development of strategies for involving parents

As a result of their investigation into a development of a rationale for parent participation the teachers devised some practical strategies for involving parents. In working with parents at Springbrook Kindergarten they hoped to achieve the following:

- establishing of two-way communications;
- sharing knowledge of the child;
- agreeing on the direction of children's learning and development;
- acknowledging that not all parents can or will participate in the same ways;
- providing for individual and group needs;
- building confidence in parents as child rearers;
- helping parents make informed decisions about their child's development;
- providing a supportive environment;
- providing information on community services;
- providing parents with opportunities to observe children;
- helping parents develop skills for managing children's behaviour;

- helping parents to use their home as a learning, as well as a social environment;
- helping parents to come to terms with what is 'normal' for children at different ages;
- helping parents communicate their needs for themselves, as well as for their children;
- keeping information about the children's program readily accessible to all.

Achnowledging that the realization of these strategies would require detailed planning, organization and patience on the part of the teacher, they believed this might be achieved if the following ideas were used:

(i) Introductory information - consisting of different ways of giving parents information of kindergarten life.

(ii) Parent development - presenting information about areas such as health, via booklets and films, or using resource people.

(iii) Daily contact - suggestions as to how parents could help on 'roster', information about the organization of the kindergarten, and the progress of children in it.

(iv) Social and fund-raising activities.

(v) Committee involvement.

They looked for some guiding principles for working with parents and found that Willis[6] had developed a useful set:

> "1. *Individual differences. Let parents have some say about values for their children - encourage some heterogeneity in child rearing ...*
>
> 2. *Normal behaviour covers a wide range, but it is not limitless ...*
>
> 3. *People who feel good about themselves, who are treated with respect, do better ...*
>
> 4. *People whose needs are met can meet other people's needs ...*
>
> 5. *Placing priority on good constructive time together in a supportive atmosphere can do more than lectures and books, to help parents and children live well together ...*
>
> 6. *Parents should be given some choices about child rearing."*

They acknowledged that while there is no set formula for creating the right atmosphere for parent participation, good strategies may allow for flexibility and more interaction between teachers and parents, and parents and parents.

3. Design of an opinionnaire to establish whether, and how much, parents want to participate in kindergarten life

An opinionnaire was selected as the means of finding out whether, and how much, parents participate (Appendix I). The Likert Method[7] was used for the opinionnaire. First, statements about a topic, (in this case parent participation), were collected. Each statement must express an opinion held by a substantial number of people and must express definite favourableness or unfavourableness to a particular point of view. The number of favourable and unfavourable statements should be about equal.

The opinionnaire devised had seven favourable and eight unfavourable statements.

The opinionnaire was first given to a trial group, and some adjustments were made, the main one being the inclusion of a comments column. The opinionnaire was then given to one hundred families to complete. Sixty-four of these were returned in the given time.

Comments received from parents were most interesting and a number had gone to a lot of trouble to explain why they chose a particular stand. Many signed their sheets, or left their child's name on the sheet for identification, although they were not asked to do so. The statement which drew most comment was 6 - Parents don't have time to participate at kindergarten. Thirty-two disagreed, ten strongly disagreed, eight were undecided, eight agreed and five left this blank. Most people added a comment to this question, in support of their choice. As a result of the opinionnaire teachers found that a majority of parents did want to participate, and were more than willing to do so if they knew what their role would be.

4. <u>Observation and recording of all types of parent participation in Term 2 1980, using diary, video and photography</u>

During Term 2, daily recordings were made by all staff members of the type of activities parents participated in. The following list indicates the ways in which parents participated during that time:

In the Daily Program

- supplying junk materials
- taking language groups
- supervising table activities
- working on skills (e.g. cutting)
- taking story groups
- helping with domestic duties
- helping with program preparation
- supervising library borrowing
- supervising the outdoor area
- cataloguing library books
- secretarial help
- joining in music and movement activities
- supervising and taking groups on excursions

In the Children's Program

- supplying resources
- joining in group discussion on children's program
- listing activities for children's program
- making materials for the children's use
- recording children's activities during indoor session time

Participation of Parents in Other Activities

- help with working bees
- inviting groups of mothers to homes for discussions and socialising
- being a Committee member
- attending social/fundraising functions
- providing goods to sell
- selling raffle tickets
- borrowing from parent library and pattern library

Photographs were taken throughout the term and a videotape was made to depict the range of parent participation at the kindergarten.

Of all the methods used for the evaluation, the videotape was the most useful. It involved the parents in the evaluation from the beginning and was a method they could easily understand. The photographs also elicited considerable comment and the teachers prepared a photograph album and had this on display at the kindergarten.

Teachers found that parents participated in many ways. They made decisions, gave information, received information, took on a teacher role, a managerial role, a domestic role, and raised funds. All of these were seen as worthwhile and no value judgements were made about the quality or quantity of participation.

CONCLUSIONS

Having found out that parents do want to participate and the ways in which they already do this, the staff at Springbrook Kindergarten can now, as a group, look at ways of improving their work with parents.

In part this will be constrained by the physical limitations of the kindergarten. However, an extension to the existing building should be ready by 1981, and this will be utilized for additional playgroups and as a facility for parents to use.

The next major step, which has emerged as a result of the evaluation, will be to publish a list of ways in which parents can participate in the kindergarten. As this list will be produced from actual examples drawn from Springbrook Kindergarten, this should prove to be an invaluable aid to their participation strategy.

APPENDIX I

OPINIONNAIRE

Dear Parents,

We are always conscious of the need for close contact and co-operation between parents and teachers.

During Term 2, we were looking at all the ways parents participate at Kindergarten and it has been no small task, because you do this in so many different ways.

We would also like to know your opinions about parents participating at Kindergarten. The following statements represent opinions (not necessarily yours or ours) and your agreement or disagreement will be determined on the basis of your particular beliefs.

Please tick your position on the scale as the statement first impresses you. It is most helpful if you tick what you really believe, rather than what you think you should believe.

(a) I strongly agree - SA

(b) I agree - A

(c) I am undecided - U

(d) I disagree - D

(e) I strongly disagree - SD

Please feel free to add any comments. The sheets will be treated in the strictest confidence. Thank you for filling it out.

STATEMENT	SA	A	U	D	SD	COMMENTS
1. Parents should be involved in their children's education at Kindergarten.						
2. Parents should be able to help decide what services their Kindergarten offers.						
3. There is not enough communication between parents and teachers.						
4. If parents help at Kindergarten their child won't learn to separate from them.						
5. Kindergarten should help parents better understand their children and to enjoy being a parent.						
6. Parents don't have time to participate at Kindergarten.						
7. Kindergarten is only for children, parents do not belong.						
8. Kindergarten could be an important place for parents to get to know other parents.						
9. Parents and teachers working together is crucial to children's social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.						
10. Parents do not want to participate because they need a rest from their children.						
11. Kindergarten teachers cannot help parents on matters that do not relate to children.						
12. Parents should not be expected to raise money for their Kindergarten.						
13. Parents would participate more if they were given instruction on how to.						
14. Teachers are paid to educate children, so parents shouldn't have to participate.						
15. Parents participate in different ways.						

Please tick/fill in the following:

Male ☐ Female ☐

Number of children in family: _____ Ages: _____

How long has your child been at Kindergarten? _____

How have you participated at Kindergarten so far? (*Please tick*)

- ☐ Paying the Levy money
- ☐ Collecting junk materials
- ☐ Taking small groups at Kindergarten
- ☐ Supervising table activities at Kindergarten
- ☐ Helping with preparation of activities
- ☐ Helping with cleaning up
- ☐ Helping with washing, mending
- ☐ Helping on excursions
- ☐ Reading all notices that are provided
- ☐ Helping at working bees
- ☐ Helping with fundraising (cooking, selling tickets, bringing goods, etc.)
- ☐ Being a Committee member
- ☐ Borrowing from parent library
- ☐ Providing resources for the topic the children are learning about
- ☐ Helping to plan the children's activities each term (coffee sessions)
- ☐ Following the children's program and talking with them about what they are learning

Please add any we have left out, and thank you very much for filling it out.

NOTES

1. Kindergarten Union of South Australia, *Pre-School Centre Staff Handbook*, Adelaide, 1979, pp.24-25.

2. D. Lawton *et al*, *Theory and Practice of Curriculum Studies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p.135.

3. A. Honig, *Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education*, National Association for Education of Young Children, Washington, 1975, pp.9-13.

4. G. Ashby, *Pre-School Theories and Strategies*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1972.

5. W. Taylor, "Family, School and Society", in Croft *et al*, *Linking Home and School*, Longmans, London, 1972, p.285.

6. A. Willis, "Working With, Against or Apart From Parents", *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 5, No. 1, March 1980, pp.17-18.

7. J. Best, *Research in Education*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1977, pp.170-175.